

Development Induced Displacement in India

The millions of displaced people do not exist anymore. When history is written they would not be in it, not even as statistics. Some of them have subsequently been displaced three and four times.... True, they are not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They are not captive, but they re-define the meaning of liberty and still the nightmare does not end. They continue to be uprooted even from their hellish hovels by government bulldozers The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war.

Arundhati Roy in
The Greater Common Good

Development and displacement may appear contradictory terms, but they are facts of our national life and these facts are more astonishing than any of our fictions. In India during last 50 years more than 50 million people have been uprooted from their homes and huts, displaced from their farms, jungles and rivers and sacrificed at the altar of 'National Interest'. These millions bear witness to the destruction of their own lives, livelihoods and lifestyles. However, development-induced displacement has largely remained a non-issue for the governments, politicians and policy planners during all these years. This is evident from the fact that the government has no data about the actual number of the people displaced as a consequence of the various development projects like Hydroelectric and Irrigation Projects, mines (especially open-cast mines), Super-Thermal and Nuclear-Power Plants, Industrial Complexes etc.

The actual number of people displaced by dams and other development projects has been quite controversial. Walter Fernandes, S.C. Das and Sam Rao had put the number of displaced people by dam projects at 21 million a decade

ago. But N.C. Saxena, the presents Secretary to the Planning Commission is reported to have said in an open meeting that the number of development induced displaced people since independence is more than 50 million and most of them have not been resettled. A review by the World Bank notes that an average of 13000 people are displaced by each new large dam constructed currently. By this estimate, the number of people displaced by 3000 + large dams would be over 39 million. According to another detailed study of 54 large dams done by Delhi based Indian Institute of Public Administration, the average number of population displaced by a large dam is 44182¹.

According to Walter Fernandes, the number of the displaced must have crossed 400 lakhs (40 million) but official figures are mostly underestimates. By official estimates only 1,00,000 were displaced by the Hirakund dam in Orissa. But researchers have put the figure at 1,80,000. By official count the Farakka Super Thermal Power plant in West Bengal affected no one. But World Bank has put the number of affected persons at 63325².

India is the third largest dam building country with over 3600 large dams and more than 700 under construction. Dams have been the biggest source of destruction of habitat and displacement of people in the last 50 years. Himanshu Thakkar, an activist of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), in his presentation to the World Commission on Dams (WCD) has quoted World Bank acknowledging that though large dams constitute only 26.6 per cent of the total WB funded projects causing displacement, the resulting displacement makes up 62.8 per cent of the total number of people displaced. It is also apparent that project authorities do not consider the problems of displacement and rehabilitation as important parts of the project. The primary concerns are engineering specifications and electricity and irrigation benefits. In this event, concerned authorities seldom undertake detailed and systematic surveys of the population to be displaced. This makes it very difficult to know the actual number of displaced persons³.

It is well known that project authorities often give less displacement figures than might actually be the case in proposal documents, to show favourable cost benefit ratio to

the funding agencies and thus get clearance for the project A World Bank review of the status of displacement and rehabilitation has shown that the displacement of as many as 0.6 million people across 192 projects had not been accounted for in project planning. In at least one instance, the number of people actually displaced was seven times the number stated in the project documents. The number of persons displaced by the Hirakud dam was between 1.1 lakh and 1.6 lakh, while the official figures are only 1.1 lakh. Unofficial figures of displacement due to the Hirakud dam are 1.8 lakh persons⁴.

In 1979 the number of families that would be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Reservoir was estimated to be a little over 6000. In 1987 it grew to 12000. In 1991 it surged to 27000. In 1992 the Government declared that 40000 families would be affected. Today, it hovers between 40000 and 41500... but according to the NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan) the actual figure is 85000 families - about half a million people...The Bergi dam near Jabalpur was the first dam on the Narmada to be completed (1990). It cost ten times more than was budgeted and submerged three times more land than the engineers said it would. About 70000 people from 101 villages were supposed to be displaced but when they filled the reservoir (without warning anybody), 162 villages were submerged⁵.

Despite the fact that the number of displaced persons since independence is more than thrice the number of population displaced by India's partition, they are yet to enter into our national consciousness. The main reason for this callous attitude according to W. Fernandes is that most displaced persons are assetless rural poor like landless labourers and small and marginal farmers (Gandhi's last man). The tribals who comprise 8.08% of India's population are estimated to be more than 40% of the displaced population. Dalits constitute 20% of displaced persons (DPs). Most of the remaining are other rural poor. It becomes abundantly clear that mostly powerless and voiceless people are displaced and made to pay the price of national progress... In the recent past the proportion of tribal population among those displaced has been growing. For example, of the 11.6 lakh persons to be displaced by 20 representative dams above 50 meters either under construction or being planned in the

1990, 59% are tribals. A recent official report on the rehabilitation of tribals, based on a comprehensive study of 110 projects, suggests that of the 16.94 lakh people displaced by these projects almost 50% were tribals⁶.

Multiple Displacement

Many DPs are subjected to multiple displacement. A chilling case of this trauma is that of the displaced of Singrauli who are part of the over 2 lakh people first displaced by the Rihand dam in 1964. "Tens of thousands" says Smitu Kothari, "who in the absence of any resettlement programs, settled on the banks of reservoir, cultivating the land which is exposed when the reservoir recedes in the summer season. They were subsequently displaced by Thermal Power plants, Coal mines, Railways, Industries and urbanisation and now face displacement for an incomprehensible fifth time in a single generation as their temporary settlements are to be evicted to make way for urban, road and rail transport and afforestation projects⁷."

According to W. Fernandes, "many Rihand dam oustees of Madhya Pradesh in the early 1960s have been displaced four times in the last 30 years. The Soliga tribals in Karnataka displaced by the Kabini dam in the 1970s are threatened with displacement a second time by the Rajiv Gandhi National Park. Many fishing families displaced by the Mangalore Port in the 1960s and resettled as agriculturists were displaced again by the Konkan Railway in the 1980s, after they had adapted themselves to farming. Many more such cases are to be found all over"⁸.

Trauma of Displacement

The post-independence development-induced displacement has mostly caused downward "spiral of impoverishments". The long drawn out, dehumanising, disempowering and painful process of displacement has led to widespread traumatic psychological and socio-cultural consequences. It causes dismantling of production systems, desecration of ancestral sacred zones or graves and temples, scattering of kinship groups and family systems, disorganisation of informal social networks that provide

mutual support, weakening of self-management and social control and disruption of trade and market links etc. This also leads to the loss of complex social relationship which used to provide avenues of representation, mediation and conflict resolution. Essentially, the very cultural identity of the displaced community and individual is subjected to massive onslaught leading to very severe physiological stress and psychological trauma.⁹

The entire process of displacement is disempowering because it breaks up socio-political organisations opposing the project or the development process itself. In the case of tribals, the experience of displacement becomes much more monstrous. They encounter tremendous odds in dealing with the market economy. Their unfamiliarity with modern technology and skills coupled with official indifference to their entry into the mainstream economy, pushes a majority of tribals into conditions of servility and bondage¹⁰.

It is tragic irony that the government - sanctioning authority of development projects - is well aware about these traumas faced by tribals. The Union ministry of home affairs has acknowledged in a report that, "in the tribal areas, where the displaced persons are given only cash compensation, the tendencies to spend the compensation amount by buying consumer goods and becoming destitute are common... In most of the projects, the tribal oustees become listless wanderers without a mooring."¹¹

The proponents of development and displacement often argue that the monetary income of the displaced person improves. Walter Fernandes has debunked this proposition. He says that out of 700 persons from 13 projects whom they interviewed in Andhra Pradesh, monetary income had improved in less than 30 cases. It deteriorated in remaining cases, at times by more than 80%. Fernandes further argues that even when monetary income rises, the life style of the displaced people does not necessarily improve. Those who measure change through the improvement of monetary income alone ignore the fact that before displacement a large number of the DPs belonged to the non-monetised or semi-monetised informal economy. To quote Fernandes, "Many of these communities sustain themselves on the CPRs (Common Property Resources) or by rendering community services to

the village or as agricultural labourers. Their lost livelihood is not compensated or replaced. So even when monetary income rises after displacement, they are often impoverished also in economic terms because the CPRs and other sources of their non-monetised livelihood are not replaced. For example, a study of the 28000 families to be displaced by the proposed Polavarem dam in Andhra Pradesh shows that the cost-benefit analysis is limited to not more than 20% of their livelihood. The rest is ignored."¹²

In a poignant remark on this 'Wild Economics of Displacement' Arundhati Roy says, "many of those who have been resettled are people who have lived all their lives deep in the forest . Instead of a forest from which they gathered everything they needed - food, fuel, fodder, rope, gum, tobacco, tooth powder, medicinal herbs, housing material - they earn between ten and twenty rupees a day with which to feed and keep their families. Instead of a river, they have a hand pump. In their old village, they had no money, but they were insured. If the rains failed, they had the forests to turn to. The river to fish in. Their livestock was their fixed deposit. Without all this, they are a heart beat away from destitution."¹³

Rehabilitation and Resettlement

Despite the severity and scale of the trauma of displacement, India is yet to formulate a national rehabilitation policy. The absence of rehabilitation in large number of projects is a major factor in the impoverishment and marginalisation of the DPs. Less than one-fourth of the DPs have been resettled. Rehabilitation is not part of most projects. Even if included in the scheme, it is done long after work on the project begins. For example, people displaced by the Tungabhadra dam in AP were resettled five years after their displacement. The DPs of the joint Orissa-Andhra venture Machkund dam were resettled after a decade of their displacement. The resettlement of the DPs of the Salaulim dam in Goa is still going on while dam was completed in the 1980s.¹⁴

Displaced People (DPs) and Project Affected People (PAPs) cannot ask for compensation or demand resettlement,

because India has neither a national rehabilitation policy nor a law. The issue of how oustees will make a living after displacement has not bothered Project planners. In most cases, the Land Acquisition Act is used to pay a symbolic cash payment as compensation to the Patta-holders. The landless and those dependent on CPRs do not get any compensation. Projects like the Sardar Sarovar and Upper Krishna have rehabilitation plans because their DPs/PAPs fought against the project or because the World Bank finances them. This is the reason why Gujarat did not have any rehabilitation scheme for the Ukai dam in the 1970s but it has one of the most progressive rehabilitation package for Sardar Sarovar oustees.... These packages are known as Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) but they are two separate things. Resettlement is one time physical relocation, whereas rehabilitation is a long drawn-out process. Only Maharashtra, MP and Karnataka have rehabilitation laws. Orissa and Rajasthan have policies.¹⁵

The available data about some high profile projects only indicates the severity of callousness and apathy of government bodies towards DPs and PAPs. 25 years after the building of the Bhakra-Nangal dam, only 730 of the 2108 families displaced in the early 1950s in Himachal Pradesh, had been resettled. Most of oustees of big projects, like the Hirakud Dam in Orissa or the Rihand dam in U.P. were never officially resettled...The example of the oustees of the Pong dam in Himachal Pradesh, who were displaced in the late 1960s is very poignant. Out of the 30,000 families, only 16,000 were found eligible for compensation and in the end only 3756 were moved hundreds of miles to a completely different cultural, linguistic and ecological zone in Rajasthan. Some of the land meant for their occupation had already been occupied, while remaining land was uncultivable. As it was not enough, the host villagers were not prepared for their arrival and finally over 75% returned to Himachal only to find little support for their re-establishment. They kept migrating all over Northern India, most of them at various stages of destitution.¹⁶ Are they still wandering in the search of their buried history?

*The author is an environmental Activist,
Researcher and Writer based in Delhi.
Currently he is working as Associate*

*Director, Seeds of Hope, Lokayan and
Deputy Editor of Humanscape magazine.*

*The author is based at
'Lokayan', New Delhi, India.*

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² Walter Fernandes. "Displacement-What is all the fuss about?", *Humanscape*, November 1999.

³ Himanshu Thakkar. *op. cit.*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Arundhati Roy. "The Greater Common Good". *Frontline*, June 4, 1999.

⁶ Walter Fernandes. *op. cit.*

⁷ Smitu Kothari. "Whose Nation? The Displaced as victims of Development". *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 15, 1996.

⁸ Walter Fernandes. *op. cit.*

⁹ Smitu Kothari. *op. cit.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Walter Fernandes. *op. cit.*

¹³ Arundhati Roy. *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Walter Fernandes. *op. cit.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Smitu Kothari. *op. cit.*